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AN EXAMINATION OF
WILLIAM JAMES'S PHILOSOPHY

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AN EXAMINATION OF
WILLIAM JAMES'S
PHILOSOPHY

A CRITICAL ESSAY
FOR THE GENERAL READER

BY
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OXFORD
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MATRI DEFLETÆ
PATRI VIVO
AMBOBVS CARISSIMIS
FILIVS
GRATVS MEMORQVE

PREFACE

ALTHOUGH in writing this essay I have had in view that large and fortunately increasing number of readers who feel a sincere interest in philosophy, and for whom James himself must always remain its leading exponent, still I have aimed at neither an introduction nor an exposition, except in so far as these are necessary to criticism; some degree of acquaintance, therefore, with James's own works is required, but that I believe is not far to seek.

But the question will be raised: Why thus at all attempt to criticise James, and at such length? Why not rather rejoice in the success of his treatment of subjects inevitably abstruse, and in the universal interest in them which he aroused?

Certainly no one can lament more than myself the prevalent limitation of philosophical study to so small a circle, necessary though specialists are in this as in all other spheres of thought; nor again would it be right were I to conceal my own intellectual indebtedness to James's writings. But none the less every teacher must ultimately be judged neither by the welcome (or equally the condemnation) he receives from his contemporaries, nor by the ability which marks the handling of his theme, but

rather by the tendency of his teaching, taken as a whole and in the long run, to elevate or to lower the life of the spirit; and in this respect I am sincerely of the opinion that James is not "on the side of the angels." Of course this is said here merely in anticipation; and equally of course there is implied not the slightest reflection on James's noble personality and character; but though sincere conviction is sufficient justification for a writer, a wider standard must be sought for his work in itself.

And while no one who writes on philosophy in these days can be entirely original, still it is possible to be independent. My obligations to other writers are, I feel sure, patent to every one acquainted with recent thought, so that it would be as impossible to enumerate them as foolish to deny them; but I have written nothing as a mere echo of others' work, and have endeavoured to set down nothing that has not received to the best of my ability independent consideration.

LIVERPOOL,

October, 1919.

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AN EXAMINATION OF WILLIAM JAMES'S PHILOSOPHY

I.—INTRODUCTORY: THE PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION AS JAMES FOUND IT.

FOR the proper understanding of philosophy, as of religion, there is always necessary a knowledge of its history; the great systems should never be regarded as originating, merely independently of each other, in the minds of different thinkers, but rather as forming the successive phases of a continuous development of human thought which is controlled by a necessity akin to that reigning in organic or cosmic evolution. In philosophy, it is true, this continuity is harder to trace, and only becomes fully manifest when the course of thought has been followed from Plato to the moderns, among whom perhaps no writer is a better instance of this inherent connection between the history of philosophy and its content than William James; for his work bears plainly the imprints of modern science, of the modern popular mind with its own peculiar hunger and thirst, and of the previous great movements in philosophy itself.¹

¹ Cf. on these aspects, the preface to *Pragmatism*.

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Whatever place may be assigned to James's thought by posterity, and whatever judgments may be passed upon it by his contemporaries, it is obvious that a system which is familiar to every intelligent person in both hemispheres, and which has been discussed as keenly in the street as in the study, has merits compelling attention and examination; for a writer who possessed such a power of bringing the arid abstractions of philosophy into the market-place is almost unique since, for their good, Socrates plagued the Athenians. People for whom Kant was only an eccentric, and Hegel a mere name, plunged under James's influence into the discussion of Dialectic and the Transcendental, and, be it added, with profit; those of invertebrate religion found new strength of soul in *The Will to Believe*; monists took alarm, and spiritualists courage, from the advocate of a pluralist universe who countenanced telepathy and a future life; and an age whose ideals were materialism and expediency listened with eagerness to the Harvard interpreter of the ancient oracles.

It is surely needless to say that such a wide influence must be explained by something besides that pretentious charlatanism which sad experience so often reveals as the basis of popularity, whether of emperors or evangelists; and James owed his world-public to abilities each as marked in itself as their combination was unique. He united in himself the exact mind of a Kelvin with the literary ease of a Macaulay, and the knowledge of a British

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encyclopædia with the lucidity of an American journalist; but neither learning nor reputation ever robbed him of a humour, receptivity, and sincere modesty which made him always as eager to learn as he was to aid; to no other was more applicable the old adage—*Homo sum : humani nihil*. . . .

Had he but possessed profundity, had his vision been as deep as it was wide, perchance the course of thought, and through that the course of history, had taken an entirely new direction; but the gods give all their gifts to no one man.

To the thinker Fate (we may presume) had fitted the age, both as regards the peculiar inner phases of philosophy itself as also the general character of the non-philosophical mind; for the whole situation which presented itself to James constituted the recurrence of a danger which seems indeed inevitably to attend the growth of every influence which seeks to ennoble humanity—that is the danger of its alienation or even its severance from ordinary everyday interests and concerns. Ecclesiasticism in religion, aristocracy in government, the esoteric in art and the formal in philosophy—each has the incalculable value of its own inherent nature, but each also the defects of the human nature by which it must be applied; and were achievement in either sphere less often attended by the loss of common sympathies, social progress would be more equable and less erratic. And it must be confessed, we think, that it is philosophy that is most prone thus to forget the Plain Man, who after all furnishes

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the final justification for her labours; nor should she be the more readily forgiven simply because her lapse is easily understood, for who after all is so blameworthy as the unphilosophical philosopher?

The earliest fathers of distinctively English philosophy, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, had all spoken in simple and even homely English; the Plain Man might resent their conclusions, but at least he understood their language, and found even the Scottish School not altogether unintelligible. But then there arose another dynasty, who knew not the Plain Man; and imperishable as is the work of Kant and his compeers, still their speech is scarce to be understood of the multitude, and with a true instinct the Plain Man distrusts the unintelligible. It is therefore not surprising that the philosophy of the nineteenth century should have become suspect of formalism, pedantry, and every other vice of the Academy—its light have been judged spectral, and its logic admirable—for everything except real difficulties;¹ while the apparent stagnation and unpractical character of philosophy became at the same time the more striking when compared with the rapid and definite progress of science during the same period.

It is only, therefore, from the point of view of this undeniable estrangement or even antagonism (whether justified or not is not here the question) between current philosophies and the general public

¹ Traces of this attitude still remain in the recent maladroitness criticisms of Philosophical Logic.

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mind that the influence and value of the philosophy of James can be properly understood and appreciated; for the true secret of his power lies in the fact that he dealt with this curious and critical situation in the world of thought as a mediator between the opposing currents of opinion. On the one hand, he approached philosophy and the philosophical world, not as a member of its inner circle—a fact which in itself, of course, detracts in no degree from his ability and intellectual power—but as one of the outer world who possessed an unusual endowment of both scientific knowledge and human sympathies; *i.e.*, in short, neither as a philosopher, nor as a scientist, but as a man; and the result was that he sought in philosophy neither merely system, consistency, nor even finality, but that to which all these are subservient—the satisfaction of the intellectual desires of the soul. Thus he voiced the eternal, deep, but inarticulate cry of the race for the scattering of the mists which cloud its mental vision, for at bottom every one of us is a philosopher;¹ the pity is that the philosophy which guides our life is so often fundamentally wrong. And if this in itself perhaps sometimes led James to reckon too lightly the difficulties of his task, and to attempt intellectual “short cuts” which were foredoomed to failure, still undoubtedly there must be found here one factor of his wide influence; men felt at once that he was essentially one of themselves, that he had

¹ See the beginning of Lecture I. in *Pragmatism*.

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a first-hand comprehension of their most pressing needs, and could give their formless desires a potent voice.

This in itself plainly counted for much, but it was not all; for James could not only formulate distinctly the deep problems of the world, he could also solve them, in some measure at least. Although he approached philosophy (to repeat) from without, not from within, none the less he spoke to the world as one born in the purple—as at once a sympathetic interpreter, a keen critic, and an original and independent thinker. No other modern philosophical writer has impressed his own personal characteristics on his work as James has done; for it may almost be said of philosophers as it was said of Pitt—that they are cast, and all, it would appear, from one mould; there are a philosophical tradition and caste, just as there are a legal, an artistic, and a diplomatic. But James broke completely this line of the philosophical succession, and the measure of the contrast is given by the fact that he did for philosophy what Macaulay did for history—he made it as readable as a good novel; scarcely any man of ordinary intelligence can fail to find in James something that he can read and enjoy.

To some extent, of course, this depth of personal impression is due to the writer's nationality; for James was one of the earliest American philosophers (in the technical sense of that term), and America is nothing if not original. So that to-day the

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American style takes rank with the English, Scottish, and German, better suited certainly to popular exposition than to studious research, as is at once evident from the slightest comparison with, *e.g.*, the stately periods of Sir William Hamilton. But only academic priggishness would condemn it on that account, and James himself has leavened it with a lightness and a humour peculiarly his own, and is, we believe, the first writer to have illustrated a philosophical principle by a good story.¹

But James not only spoke, as we have endeavoured to show, to philosophers on behalf of the common man, but he also spoke to both as himself a philosopher; and if, like Paul, he was as one born out of due time, he also, like him, compelled the elders to hearken. The most animated, if not the most vital, recent philosophical controversy has centred around Pragmatism; and among the Pragmatists James was another "Rupert of debate," keeping ever in the front of battle the question of the cynical Roman, "What is Truth?"

Nor is it easy at first sight to see why this problem, apparently as immortal as Truth itself, should prove to be such a storm centre as it has done, unless it be that mankind resents the claims of philosophers to present them with their diverse and conflicting truths, without having first settled among themselves what Truth in itself is. Not that James claimed to give any new answer to the old question, for he styled Pragmatism "a new name for some

¹ See *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 277.

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old ways of thinking," and held that he did no more than revive a simple and sane attitude to the problem, which he would substitute as being all that is required, for what he held to be the unnecessarily complex and formal theories of the professed philosophers.¹ Certainly his own lucidly expressed views and trenchant criticisms compelled universal attention, with the result that there followed a general overhauling of purely philosophical principles that is, we think, without historical parallel; and the consideration of this subject is perhaps the best method of beginning a more detailed exposition of James's whole body of views. Much of the heat of the controversy and of the difficulty of agreement arose, we think, from the general lack of clearness as to the issues involved which characterised all the contestants alike, and this, too, without any of them, least of all James himself, being personally responsible, for each side seemed strangely fated to misunderstand the other, and consequently to attribute to its opponent views and modes of expression which were promptly repudiated, but only to be followed by a precisely similar offence; and so long-continued and obstinate a confusion of issues can, we think, only be properly explained by the view that both sides were partially right, while at the same time each ignored the true aspects of the opposed contentions—a condition of things which still exists to some degree.

¹ "I do not like the name," he says himself (*Pragmatism*), Preface.

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But while this appears to be the true state of the case, James none the less appears, in our opinion, certainly not wholly wrong, but, let us say, not "on the side of the angels"; and we think further, that on such fundamental philosophical principles, a thinker of James's ability should have taken a far deeper view than he actually did; we think that his defect (as we regard it) in this respect arose, of course certainly not from any lack of sincerity, care, and knowledge, but from his attaching an exaggerated value to the quality—excellent, of course in itself—of simplicity. The prevalent demand among people of undoubted earnestness, for the simple life, appears to include a simple philosophy; the general opinion seems to be that any system of thought is bound to be wrong in proportion to its complexity; and the theories of Truth which James criticised were admittedly far from being simple, as every student of Kant and Hegel knows to his cost. Perhaps, further, the antagonism which James felt for these thinkers arose in some measure from the "simple" fact which is, however, not so simple as it appears, that he was an American while they were Germans, the ideal of the typical American being an efficiency or practicability as simple as is possible; to him theory, for mere theory's sake, is anathema. Now, Pragmatism certainly appears to have the merit of simplicity, and were the universe other than it is, some simple theory of that type would be all sufficient; as things are, however, a "simple" philosophy is an utter

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impossibility, merely because the universe, which every philosophy is an attempt to reflect, if not to explain,¹ is itself far too complex to permit itself to be fitted by any "simple" scheme of thought.

This opinion requires, of course, substantiation, which, however, we believe, a review of the questions at issue will go some way to provide. First, then, as to Pragmatism itself.

¹ Of course no philosophy can really *explain* the universe, because we can only explain anything in terms of something beyond itself, and obviously there can be nothing beyond the universe; at most, thought can only reflect or reconstruct it.

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WE think the question, "What is Pragmatism?" is not, in view of the still prevalent confusion just alluded to, even to-day belated; and if we add that, in our opinion, the very prince of pragmatists is Browning's Bishop Blougram, we think we have said much, if not sufficient, to justify an adverse verdict even from James himself. If we consider underlying principles, as distinct from merely superficial personal characteristics, Browning's cleverly drawn Bishop need not necessarily be regarded as a caricature, either of Cardinal Wiseman or of anyone else; in *principles* the Bishop is the typical pragmatist.

"I promised we'd see truth dawn together,"
he begins; but for him—

"No abstract intellectual plan of life
But one a man may lead—

in New York, or even Boston; and his—

"Once own the use of faith, I'll find you faith,"

"Not historic knowledge, logic sound, and metaphysical
acumen"—

"The steadfast hold on faith gives all the advantage"—

"How one acts is our chief concern"¹—

¹ Bishop Blougram's Apology.

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all these are the very essence of Pragmatism, with its insistence on practical action, on efficiency—success—"working"—as the basal and final tests of truths and Truth.

Now, all these familiar pragmatic contentions must be admitted to be essentially and undeniably true; and those of us who cannot reckon ourselves pragmatists do so, not because Pragmatism is fundamentally untrue, but merely because it is insufficient; not because it is false, but merely because it is, as a system which claims to be final, defective; not because it tends in the wrong direction, but because it does not go far enough in the right. Vitally important as we admit its cardinal principles to be, we yet hold that it leaves out of account much that it is absolutely incumbent upon any philosophy which regards itself as complete to deal with. "Truth is that which works, and that which works is Truth." We fully agree; but must we not ask the further questions, Why does it work? What is there, that is, in the nature of any theory (which means, ultimately, in the nature of the Universe) which makes that theory successful, and upon which its continuous applicability to practice depends? We agree again that successful practice is the test of true theory; but there still remain the questions, Exactly what is "Practice"? And how is it related to "Theory"?

Now, there is here involved a fundamental question, which concerns the very existence of all philosophy properly so called. If, that is, on the

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one hand, James and the pragmatists are right, then what need is there for philosophy, in any strict and exact sense of that word, at all? But if, on the other hand, some kind or other of philosophy be necessary, then this must at once go far beyond the pragmatic position, without, however, thereby implying that that position is in itself erroneous, except as being defective and incomplete.

Pragmatism as a philosophical system, that is to say, is really nothing more than the universal and rationalised extension and application of what, in a more limited sphere, is called the Rule of Thumb—a rule, of course, excellent within its own realm, but none the less certainly a principle which Philosophy must either transcend or at once belie its own nature. For it is no properly philosophical account of any theory, belief, or principle whatever to say that it is true because, and in so far as, it (in pragmatist parlance) “works”; and this opinion is based on grounds much deeper than the easy citation of principles and theories which have (to a certain extent) “worked,” although they were afterwards discovered to be untrue. We must certainly say of any principle that *if* it works (in the long run) it is true,¹ but it is a totally different thing to say that *because* it “works,” *therefore* it is true; and even were this second assertion permissible, still, thought, in making this transition, enters upon an entirely new sphere, and can never ground the second principle merely and solely upon

¹ Or probably true, and increasingly so.

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the first. But James never appears to have distinguished these two issues from each other, nor to have recognised the fundamental fact that philosophy is but little concerned with a mere "If," while it is essentially its proper task to deal with "Because." "If" is (here) a question of ascertainable fact, while "Because" is always a matter of distinctly rational thought; and these two issues must never be confused with each other, much less be regarded as one and the same.

"If" a theory works can be tested by experiment; but no experiments alone will determine the "Because" of its success. Trial, experience, experiment—all of which are concerned with facts and with "If"—may ascertain the success, the "working" of a theory, but something more is necessary to explain the nature of its truth.

If the pragmatist contention, then, is well founded—if the true is essentially what "works"—truth itself is for ever unattainable. For it is an almost obvious commonplace that no system of pure principles, and no high ideal, will "work" in our actual world; what "works" there is never truth, but compromise. It is the tragedy of all systems of thought and of ethics, of all æsthetic ideals and all economic principles, that these as such will not "work" without more or less accommodation to the exigencies of actual life. No mathematician has ever drawn a perfect circle, and no social movement will ever achieve the millennium; and therefore it follows, if we adopt the pragmatic contention,

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that neither geometry nor economics can be really true.

Then there appears to be another serious defect in the pragmatist theory of the nature of truth. If we say that the test of truth is that it "works," then, this assertion being, of course, itself true, the question at once arises—How is its own truth to be established? Now, obviously we cannot here apply the pragmatist test itself—that truth is what "works"—without at once committing the logical fallacy of assuming as true the very question at issue; either, then, this principle must remain for ever unproved; or it must be proved by a method which is not pragmatic.

It would, in short, appear that the contentions of Pragmatism, justified, as was admitted at the outset, by the severance (more apparent, however, than real) which is generally believed to exist between theory and practice, are fundamentally erroneous in pressing so far the closeness of the connection between practice and theory as almost to identify, and certainly to confuse, these with each other; for intimate as is the relation between them—one function of theory being to determine practice, which again in its turn requires correct theory—still the distinction between them must never be lost sight of; and philosophy, purely as such, is always concerned, in the first place at least, with theory, and only secondarily with practice. As for this distinction in itself, it is analogous to the familiar distinctions between

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science and art, between legislation and administration, and between religious belief and moral action. In every region of human experience, *i.e.*, there is a realm, which, taken in itself, is certainly incomplete, but is still a "world" of general principles, which govern so large a number of cases that they are applicable, without some qualification, to none in particular; and this sphere, in its most general character, it is the proper work of philosophy as such to explore, just as Parliament should always legislate with one eye on Utopia. Still, this realm of purely theoretical principles is, in itself, incomplete, and demands for its full completeness the correlative sphere of practical action—always as its complement, and sometimes as its corrective, but never as its supplanter; each is as impossible without the other as is either pole of a magnet, and as it is the capital fault of pseudo-intellectualism to sever this world of pure principles from its moorings in actual practice, so Pragmatism tends, on the other hand, just as illegitimately, to seek in practice alone the sole grounds for the regulation of that practice itself.

Further, again, the fact appears to have been entirely overlooked that the school of thought which is opposed to Pragmatism long ago gave plain utterance to some of the main contentions of modern Pragmatism itself, and in this connection James figures as a philosophical Don Quixote attacking the windmills; had he given closer consideration to the views of some of the thinkers he

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criticised, he would surely have found that most of his objections had been fully met in advance, and that what he dealt with was really a radical misinterpretation and perversion of their actual position. Scarcely any writer, as is well known, has been more severely criticised by James than Mr. Bradley, whose entire system of thought is repeatedly condemned as rationalistic and intellectualistic, and as anathema to all good pluralists, pragmatists, and empiricists. [But a few short quotations from Mr. Bradley's writings should be sufficient to show that some at least of the pragmatic principles which James so forcibly maintained were long ago admitted, for what they are worth; *e.g.*, we find—

“The test of truth after all, we may say, lies in presented fact”;¹ “there is a fair presumption that any truth *which cannot be exhibited at work* is for the most part untrue”² and it is a mistake to try “to find reality in the world of insensible thought”;³ “to suppose that mere thought without facts could either be real, or could reach to truth, is evidently absurd”;⁴ and it appears scarcely possible to express the pragmatic standpoint more lucidly than do these extracts from Mr. Bradley's writings. It is true, of course—for otherwise it is difficult to

¹ *Appearance and Reality*, p. 380. The first edition of this work appeared, it should be noted, in 1893.

² *Ibid.*, p. 400 (italics mine).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 377, “insensible” meaning bare thought—divorced, *i.e.*, from all sense content or basis.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

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see what could be in dispute between him and James—that these truths at once receive further qualification. Mr. Bradley proceeds to point out that “it is only the meaner realities which . . . are able to be verified as sensible facts”;¹ “comparative ability to exist . . . within the region of sense is a sign . . . of degradation in the scale of being”;² and this further necessary development of the points at issue at once both accepts the essential truth, and exposes the fatal defects, of the entire pragmatist standpoint as this is maintained by its recent upholders.

It may be said, then, in general that the pragmatic view of truth is always defective; but the particular presentation which James himself gives of Pragmatism certainly appears to express a false conception of truth, though this may be due to nothing more than his fondness for somewhat extreme and forcible modes of expressing his ideas.

✓ In the first place, he appears to lay too much emphasis on the standpoint of the individual as an individual. “A new opinion counts as true,” we are told, “just in proportion as it gratifies the *individual's* desire to assimilate the novel; . . . its success is a matter for the *individual's* appreciation.”³ But it is surely impossible to maintain this opinion with any literalness, either in practice or in theory, for the mere gratification of the indi-

¹ *Appearance and Reality*, p. 377.

² *Ibid.*, p. 379.

³ *Pragmatism*, p. 63 (italics mine).

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vidual's desire for harmony in his experience is never (even to himself) a sufficient test of truth; the satisfaction of his own desire must always accord, to some degree, with that of other individuals, for otherwise truth would be a matter of personal preference—truth would be merely solipsistic. Then again: "When old truth grows by new truth's addition, it is for subjective reasons."¹ But reasons, *as reasons*, are never merely subjective, though our response to them may be; we never "obey reasons" because we choose, but because we must. Reason in itself, *i.e.*, is never a matter of merely subjective and individual gratification, but is always a matter of objective necessity, although at the same time obedience to reason may be subjective; and, indeed, James himself plainly brings out this element of necessity, for a new idea "makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way it works, grafting itself. . . ."² Here surely we are in a region quite different from the mere gratification of individual desire.

But at the same time to say this is not to hold (as James puts it) that truth "must be what we ought to think *unconditionally*—must be an absolute correspondence of our thoughts with absolute reality—must be remote, august, exalted."³ Indeed, for that type of philosophical logic which regards Pragmatism as defective, the conditions of thought

¹ *Pragmatism*, p. 63.

² *Ibid.*, p. 64 (*italics mine*).

³ *Loc. cit.*, p. 67 (*italics mine*).

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in themselves always form an absolutely essential element of the problem; but these conditions are never the only element.¹ And we find, indeed, that James himself comes to abandon this merely individualist standpoint; for truth "fits every part of life best, and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, *nothing being omitted*."² Here it is plain that we have transcended the individual and his gratification, and have entered the region of the whole, which goes beyond the mere individual and has its own inherent necessity.

¹ This is a principle so fundamental and so constantly insisted upon that it is impossible to give references except in general to the works of Hegel, Bradley, and Bosanquet. See the latter's *Logic*, vol. i., pp. 39-44; and as regards correspondence vol. ii., chap. ix.

² *Pragmatism*, p. 80 (*italics mine*).

III.—JAMES'S APPLICATIONS OF PRAGMATISM

As becomes a consistent pragmatist, the presentation of James's general position is followed by "some metaphysical problems pragmatically considered," the first of which is the old troublesome question of Substance,¹ with which is conjoined the questions of design in nature, and of free-will; and in all these instances the conclusion at which James arrives is that the real meanings of each issue lie in the "adjustments of our concrete attitudes of hope and expectation, and all the delicate consequences which their differences entail—not in hair-splitting abstractions about matter's inner essence, or about the metaphysical attributes of God";² in short, that is, the import of these momentous issues consists in each case in its influence and bearing on what we may call our general moral or spiritual attitude to the universe.

Now all this, of course, is most true and valuable, but none the less it shares in the fatal defect characteristic of all pragmatic contentions—of being true so far as they go, but in not going far enough; it centres the issue, that is, wholly upon the individual

¹ *Pragmatism*, Lecture III.

² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

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thinker and his "attitudes of hope and expectation", instead of upon his universe at large as systematically organised. James looks at these problems from the wrong end of the telescope; he considers exclusively, that is, their connection with us instead of their connection with the universe, and places their meaning in the "different emotional and practical appeals" they make instead of in their harmony (or discord) with the system of the universe as a whole. In philosophy as in other matters it is the case that outsiders see most of the game, and this insistence on individual and personal considerations only confuses the real issue. Perhaps an illustration will make the position somewhat clearer. A soldier in battle cannot interpret the meaning of "victory" and "defeat" in terms of the "emotional and practical appeals" these make to him, poignant though they be; on the contrary, his own personal and individual preferences must be subordinated to much wider issues, and the situation must be regarded from the national, and not merely the personal, standpoint, for these plainly may conflict with each other. And similarly in philosophy the merely human interest must yield place to the universal; as James himself says: "We can *study* our God only by studying His creation,"¹ and study must always be disinterested and dispassionate, so far at least as its results go.

The next problem James selects is "The One and

¹ *Pragmatism*, p. 109.

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the Many," but as this also forms the subject of his later book, *A Pluralistic Universe*, in which we find his more developed thought, its consideration may be here deferred, and we may pass to "Pragmatism and Common Sense," where what appears to be a vital issue is raised.

"Common sense," it must be noted, has here the specialised philosophical meaning of man's "use of certain intellectual forms or categories of thought,"¹ which (James contends) "are discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors, which have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time."² Let us now admit the truth of this theory of the origin of "our fundamental ways of thinking" and consider it in its connection with that "pragmatic account of what truth everywhere signifies" which is given in the lecture "What Pragmatism means."³

Truth then, according to that account, "means nothing but this: that ideas . . . become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience." Now, this function of relating us to "other parts of our experience" is performed by "common sense" (taking this term in its narrower and philosophic meaning) "in an extraordinarily successful way";⁴ and plainly, therefore, if we apply Pragmatism's own universal test, "common sense" must be, in

¹ *Pragmatism*, p. 171.

² *Ibid.*, p. 170. Cf. also *Meaning of Truth*, p. 62.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

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the highest possible degree, true. But, it is most surprising to find, the direct contrary is the case; far from being, as every principle of Pragmatism would seem to necessitate, pre-eminently true, the results and categories of common sense must be distrusted—we must “suspect that, in spite of their being so venerable, . . . its categories may after all be only a collection of extraordinarily successful hypotheses,” that would, moreover, “have lasted for ever but for the excessive intellectual vivacity of . . . Galileo and Berkeley.” This is surely an incredibly strange conclusion to come from so convinced a pragmatist; for we now find that very character—the successful dealing with our experience, which hitherto has been the sole and essential sign of truth—actually becoming here the ground for our distrust, and, further, so becoming owing to that very “intellectual vivacity” of philosophers which has all along been the object of James’s severest criticism. It would appear equally impossible to avoid, and to resolve, these contradictory standpoints, and the solution, therefore, must be left to later pragmatists themselves to supply.

Turning next to “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” the first point concerns the definition of that term; and it must certainly be held to be questionable whether “pragmatists and intellectualists both accept” the definition that truth “means the agreement of certain of our ideas with

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reality"¹—accept, *i.e.*, what is usually called the “correspondence theory” of truth. Against this opinion it should suffice to quote one of the foremost English writers on Logic, speaking for a large and representative school of thought.

“I cannot,” he says, “conceive how the doctrine of correspondence can be adopted as a serious theory,”² and it should therefore be plain that it is futile for Pragmatism to seek to establish itself by the criticism of a theory of truth which at least some “intellectualists” (applying this term very loosely) so emphatically repudiate in advance; this is but another instance of James’s Quixotic tilting at windmills which has already been referred to at the outset. But it is none the less the conception to which he adheres throughout—“our ideas must agree with realities . . . so far intellectualists can raise no protest.”³ This gives the keynote of his whole treatment of the problem of truth—a treatment which is obviously based, however, on a radical misconception of much current logical theory as this is found in its best exponents.

And when we consider James’s view on its own merits, independently of its acceptance or rejection by other writers, we find that it ultimately raises a serious dilemma. “The true,” says James, “. . . is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in

¹ *Pragmatism*, p. 198.

² Bosanquet, *Logic*, vol. ii., p. 263.

³ *Pragmatism*, p. 211, and also *The Meaning of Truth*, *passim*.

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the way of our behaving." But if this be the case, how is it that we habitually use these two different terms for the same thing? Why, that is, do we employ "true" and "expedient," as also "right" and "expedient," if they both have essentially the same meaning? How has mankind come to make any kind of distinction whatever between truth and expediency if none such exists in reality? And if, on the other hand, we admit the existence of some difference (however slight) between these terms, what is its exact nature? This fundamental difficulty James does not consider; but it must nevertheless be regarded as a wholly illegitimate assumption to conceive truth and "expediency in the way of our thinking" as being one and the same. On the contrary, truth has little to do with the psychical activity of thinking in itself; it is an attribute, not at all of our thinking activity, but of the resultant system of conceptions and ideas which our thinking gives us. It is the harmony, the internal agreement, of this system—its coherence and freedom from self-contradiction—quite apart from the intellectual activity of thinking, whose function is to build up this system in itself; and in concluding the consideration of *Pragmatism*, it must be said that this view of Truth is one which James does not appear to have dealt with at all.

IV.—PLURALISM AND EMPIRICISM

(a) PRELIMINARY.

WE have already seen one of the "metaphysical problems pragmatically considered" to be "The One and the Many," the treatment of which, however, was deferred until it could be taken in the deeper and wider presentation which we have in James's later work, *A Pluralistic Universe*. This, as its title indicates, deals with the problem of the ultimate nature of the world as a whole: Is the universe one, that is, or many? Unified or disconnected? Controlled by one Power or by more than one? Or, if we prefer to interpret the title in terms more strictly philosophical, we may say that it is concerned with the basal nature of reality, as distinguished, *i.e.*, from the main theme of *Pragmatism*, which was the nature of truth; and perhaps a few preliminary remarks may be in place before giving the work detailed consideration.

In considering the nature of truth and the nature of reality, it is too often taken for granted that the two problems are independent of each other—that they have little, if any, interconnection, and can therefore, at least to some extent, be separately treated. But it should be more generally under-

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stood than it appears to be that this assumption is wholly without foundation, and must, indeed, from the very outset prevent the attainment of any satisfactory solution; for the first condition of success is the recognition of the hopelessness of separating the consideration of either problem from that of the other; and no satisfactory theory of truth is at all possible apart from some more general theory of reality as a whole, of which truth itself is merely a part.

It is therefore more than merely accidental that, connected with James's pragmatic principles, there is found that theory of reality which is outlined in *A Pluralistic Universe*, taken together with *Essays in Radical Empiricism*: though at the same time it must be said that the closeness of the connection between the two problems is never there presented as clearly as it should be, if the essential nature of the whole question is to be properly apprehended. "There is," says James, "no logical connection between Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism"¹—the one, *i.e.*, as a theory of truth, and the other as a theory of general reality.

But if there was no logical relation, there was at least the connection which arose from the adoption of a similar general attitude on both subjects; for in both cases alike James criticised the views which he found to be at the time most in favour, and throughout appeared as a reformer, if not indeed as a rebel. For just as he attacked the prevailing

¹ *Pragmatism*. Preface, p. ix.

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idealistic theories of truth, so he challenged the dominant monistic theories of reality, and pleaded for some type of Pluralism as at least a possible alternative. Indeed, his attitude towards Monism almost reminds us of Voltaire and his vehement "écrasez l'infâme," except that of course there was never the faintest trace of the great Frenchman's cruel bitterness; for James's criticism is always a tonic, but never a scourge.

Now, all systematic thinking centres ultimately (however indirectly and remotely) on some presumed general character of the thinker's world. At the bottom of every man's mind lies the principle, whether this find definite expression or not, that "The world is such that" some consequences or other must follow, be these trivial or fundamentally important; and this being the case, the natural and instinctive tendency of speculation is always towards the formulation, more or less definite and developed, of some type of Monism—towards the acceptance, *i.e.*, of some *one* basal and all-controlling principle or conception. For it is obviously easier for thought to deal with one such idea than with several, which, if not ultimately harmonious with each other, must involve the intellectual inconvenience of their mutual contradiction and conflict. It is, then, only the inevitable outcome of this spontaneous tendency of the human mind that the great historic philosophical (as distinguished from religious) systems have been monisms of some type or other—whether materialist, pantheist, or absolutist; and therefore

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every pluralist theory which is put forward has to withstand from the outset the authoritative weight of long continued tradition, combined with the enormous strength of our natural mental instincts.

It is, we think, only with this fundamental principle in mind—that some general conception of the nature of ultimate reality, however vague that conception may be, lies at the basis of every system of thought, without exception—that any correct appreciation of James's views is possible; and at the outset the point irresistibly suggests itself that the title adopted—*A Pluralistic Universe*—must surely contain an insurmountable contradiction—can there be, that is, in the end, a *universe* which is pluralistic? Would not such a world be a multiverse, and no true universe at all? “Universe” surely means, essentially, oneness somewhere, however that unity may be hidden from our finite spiritual vision behind the veil of independent existences which it appears impossible to comprehend within any coherent monistic scheme; and, indeed, we think that in the end it will be found that James's Pluralism is after all much more apparent than real, and that his quarrel was never so much with Monism itself, regarded as being a perfectly general philosophical principle, as rather with those particular types of Monism which he understood different thinkers had advocated, and as against which he himself finally comes to argue after all for a unity of his own.

“Pluralism—Empiricism,” begins James, with

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his usual happiness in seizing and presenting the essentials of a question, "means the habit of explaining wholes by parts, and Rationalism means the habit of explaining parts by wholes";¹ and if to this we add "Rationalism is always monistic,"² we have the main issue set plainly before us, between a rationalistic Monism on the one hand, and a pluralist universe, conjoined (though not logically and essentially) with Pragmatism, on the other.

It will perhaps conduce to the clearer understanding of this issue to consider here the view which James has expressed as to the nature and function of philosophy in general—apart, *i.e.*, from the special details of any particular philosophical system.

"No philosophy," he asserts "can ever be anything but a summary sketch, a picture of the world in abridgement, a foreshortened bird's-eye view of the perspective of events"; and I think we find in this characterisation of philosophy the essential defect of James's whole general position—in always, that is, regarding philosophy as a "*sketch*," a "*picture of the world*," a "*bird's-eye view*";³ for this surely is what philosophy, essentially as such, is not. History and natural science (again purely

¹ *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 7. Perhaps "principle" would be a better term than "habit," which suggests an unthinking preference. On "rationalism" see further below, (p. 46).

² *Pragmatism*, p. 11.

³ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 8. The italics are mine, and are intended to indicate the fundamental defects of this definition of philosophy.

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as such), may be such a sketch or picture, but even they only in their immature stages and more superficial aspects; and as they come in the course of their natural development to deal less with facts and events, and more with principles—as they become, *i.e.*, less purely mere science and history—just in so developing do they approach the region of philosophy proper, which always and essentially deals not with facts and events merely as such, but with their underlying and determining principles; not, therefore, with “a picture of the world in abridgement,” but with a rationale, however vague and inadequate that may prove to be, of the universe in its infinity; and had James risen above what we believe must in truth be called this very superficial view of the real nature of philosophy, his treatment of its problems would surely have been more fruitful and final.

It is perhaps, however, necessary to add here that it is an equally false conception of philosophy (only from the opposite standpoint) to regard it as dispensing entirely with facts, whether historic or scientific, and as pursuing its majestic course quite independently of those data which it is the province of history and science to supply; although certainly there is always the tendency among thinkers (which is exemplified in the vast débris of their historic systems, and arises from a lazy conceit in their native intellectual powers) to despise “mere facts” and “mere history,” and to endeavour to establish comprehensive principles on the scanty basis of a

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larger or smaller number of postulates which are assumed to be almost if not quite self-evident. Even Hegel is not quite free from this reproach, so far as his anticipations of natural science go. And against all thought of this kind it must, of course, be at once admitted that the contentions of Pragmatism are amply justified—its essential standpoint can never be dispensed with as a corrective to this tendency to philosophise in airy independence of all data and all results; and while all is grist that comes to philosophy's mill, grist it must find in historic and scientific research.

That James's conception of philosophy as a "sketch," a "picture of the world," is thus from the outset radically faulty, will perhaps become more obvious if we apply the principles I have just endeavoured to outline to the concrete case of any great work of art—a great picture, *e.g.*, or statue, or symphony. For in all these instances alike it is impossible to obtain any true appreciation of their real value, any deep insight into their essential meaning, from any sketch, from even the most faithful reproduction, or from any bird's-eye view of the events connected with the origin of the work. We may, indeed, have a superabundance of such facts, and still be far from that true understanding of it as a work of art which can come only from a wide grasp of the æsthetic (or even moral) principles which find their expression in the work as a concrete example and

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instance.¹ In short, *i.e.*, all true appreciation of, and all deep insight into, any great concrete reality demand much more than (though they are impossible without) a mere picture, a "view of the perspective of events"—demand always the transformation and assimilation of these into a coherent intellectual rationale, which alone can fully and adequately interpret its object to the mind.

Now the real character of philosophy can only be properly understood if this view of the nature of the proper apprehension of art and its products is extended to its farthest limits; for if we seek, within the contents of concrete experience, some analogue (however remote) to the universe itself, it is surely to art that we must turn. There is, perhaps, a sense in which the universe is the work of a great artist.² Here again, then, no abridged picture, no mere bird's-eye view of events, can ever furnish what it is the constant aim of philosophy to provide; and to take such a view is to misinterpret its true function, which should rather be regarded as the mind's attempt to achieve an intellectual reconstruction, in all its fulness, of the vast reality which confronts it, at once revealing itself in and underlying "facts" and "events." These philosophy must seek so to transcend and penetrate as to harmonise into a rational whole, which at the same

¹ This principle of course applies also, with the necessary modifications in each case, to every great system of morals, economics, or religion; further examples are needless.

² It may be objected that this crude view at once implies dualism, but every analogue has some defect.

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time, however, constantly expands in an eternal approach to the infinite reality itself.

Reverting now, with these principles in mind, to the antitheses which James presses home between Monism and Pluralism, as regards their treatment of parts and wholes, here again we find that his attempt to substitute Pluralism for Monism appears to defeat itself at the very outset, through the concepts which James finds it necessary to use, and without which he cannot express his thought at all. The only way, *i.e.*, in which the problem itself can be stated is in terms of "whole and part," and then it appears to follow at once that some ultimate whole—*i.e.*, some type of Monism—is necessarily implied from the beginning by the very terms employed.

It is, further, always the aim of philosophy to deal with the most ultimate concepts which it can form—with anything less than these it cannot be content. But if this be true, and if at the same time our concepts must thus take the form of "whole and parts," then it would seem to follow, since "whole" is plainly a more ultimate idea than "part," that it must be one object of philosophy to frame the conception of a whole of some kind or other; and while we may, *i.e.*, question the adequacy of any particular "whole-idea" which may be offered as final, still we must admit as certainly necessary the idea of an ultimate whole of some kind—we must acquiesce in the search for the whole as being the true goal, even though we assay and reject any particular proffered wholes

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as being mere alloys, or even as worthless; and this is plainly to regard the final form of the world-idea as monistic. And, indeed, the preference in itself for pluralistic concepts in philosophy would really appear to be analogous to a reversion (in religion) from monotheism to polytheism. The historic religious evolution seems to have a strict parallel in philosophy, for the one meets the spiritual demand for ultimate unity, and the other the intellectual. It would thus be as perilous to the highest interests of human nature to acquiesce in this choice of pluralism (even were it possible so to turn back the tides of thought) as would be the transition to the worship of our heathen ancestors. The human mind will always tend to reduce its ultimate world-forces to the smallest possible number, as it will always bow before as select a pantheon as it can conceive; and every call to a halt in Pluralism is merely an attempt to arrest the mind's progress, and as such will never be acquiesced in. Thought thus regards every disjunction in its world as merely provisional, and endeavours continually to transcend it in the search for the unity which it believes to be at once hidden beneath, and expressed in, every discrepancy; the mind realises itself as one in spite of its own manifoldness, and seeks a kindred unity in its world: it will have

“ Every quality and pith
Surcharged and sultry with a power
That works its will on age and hour.”¹

¹ Emerson: *Unity*.

V.—PLURALISM AND EMPIRICISM—*Continued*

(b) JAMES'S OWN POSITION.

IT is now necessary to attempt a more detailed presentation of James's arguments for Pluralism, which are accompanied by his criticisms of what he calls "intellectualistic logic." "The philosophy of the absolute," then, "agrees with the pluralistic philosophy . . . in that both identify the human substance with the divine substance. . . . Whereas absolutism thinks that the said substance becomes fully divine only in the form of totality, and is not its real self in any form but the all-form, the pluralistic view . . . is willing to believe that there may ultimately never be an all-form at all, that the substance of reality may never get totally collected, that some of it may remain outside of the largest combination of it ever made, and that a distributive form of reality, the each-form, is as acceptable as the all-form."¹

This clear passage needs no elucidation—the

¹ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 34. Cf. also p. 50, and contrast these with the quotation from Emerson, p. 51.—"I yielded myself to the perfect whole,"—in this contrast, properly understood, lies the entire issue.

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basal issues could not be more plainly stated. Unfortunately it contains at the same time a most serious defect—it applies to ultimate reality categories which in truth are wholly inapplicable to it, and which absolutism, at least, has always declined to use. It is certain that the substance of reality can never be a totality—a combination—can be neither collected nor distributed, and can be viewed under neither an all-form nor an each-form; but the real reason is that these terms are all and equally fundamentally inadequate when they are applied to ultimate reality, simply because they are terms derived from mere mathematical abstractions which always remain abstractions, and which as such therefore can never be employed to qualify concrete reality in all its fulness. To insist, with the modern Idealists, that reality is a whole is to insist that it is never a mere totality; to say that it is a unity, or a universe, is to say in the same breath that it is neither a combination nor a collection; and that though it certainly comprises elements or constituents, still these at the same time are never merely parts.

[James, *i.e.*, here certainly appears to have failed to distinguish between a whole with its elements, and a totality with its parts; he regards these two conceptions as equivalent to each other, whereas in truth the ideas of “totality” and “parts” arise only through an intellectual abstraction which finally culminates in pure mathematical concepts; while on the other hand the idea of “whole” and

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"elements" expresses, so far as thought can seize and language utter, the ultimate nature of the world.

There is therefore, so far, nothing really in dispute between James's Pluralism and modern Monism. James is here labouring a point which has never been questioned, but has on the contrary been contended for time and again, although of course from an altogether different standpoint; so that we may pass to the consideration of the more positive arguments for pluralism which are put forward. We have, then, further:

"What pluralists say is that a universe really connected loosely, after the pattern of our daily experience, is possible and . . . to be preferred";¹ and on this two comments suggest themselves.

(a) Is it not the work of philosophy to endeavour to transcend this standpoint of "daily experience"?² Why must we accept this mode as our ultimate type and model, rather than the perhaps higher phases of more unusual experiences? James (as will be seen later) takes the standpoint of Bergson, who regards those aspects of the world which the intellect presents to us as mere distortions of the truly real. But this "daily experience" after all is very largely the result of habitual *intellectual* processes which we accept and acquiesce in unthinkingly; so that we cannot argue, as James does here, for

¹ L. c., p. 76.

² Cf. "The absolute things, the last things, are the truly philosophic concerns." *Pragmatism*, p. 108.

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a real universe of the "pattern of daily experience," and at the same time declare (with Bergson) that the intellect gives us merely a distorted reality—the two positions are plainly directly opposed to each other, since "daily experience" itself depends at bottom and in the main on the intellect. For if, on the one hand, daily experience gives us, as James here asserts, something resembling ultimate reality, then we are compelled to abandon Bergson's conclusion that the intellect always misinterprets the real; but if on the other hand we agree with Bergson, then the real universe cannot be anything which resembles our daily experience, as James assumes that it may—there is no escape from the direct contradiction which exists between these two opposed standpoints.

(b) But we may ask further, is daily experience really and in fact "loosely connected," as James asserts, or is it so only to a superficial scrutiny? The truth appears to be that only as we approach the level of animal and idiot intelligence, the more "loosely connected" does experience become, whereas our life is at its highest only when it becomes penetrated and controlled by some constant purpose and ideal which unites its infinite variety into a true whole.

It is most important to notice, too, that James makes here several very large concessions to Rationalism, which appear if pressed home to undermine completely his contentions on behalf of Pluralism. We find, for example: "Some rationality certainly

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does characterise our universe";¹ "In the end nothing less than the whole of everything can be the truth of anything at all."² Now we cannot go merely half-way, as it were, in this question of the rationality of the universe; the issue is clear: the universe is either rational or it is irrational—no *via media* is here possible. A universe which has merely "some rationality," which is partly rational and partly irrational, is in the end (at bottom) irrational throughout; we must say that its irrationality carries the day, just as a person who is insane, although intermittently, is really an insane and not a sane person—he is judged, that is, by his occasional departures from normality, not by his (perhaps frequent) agreements with it. And we must obtain the same result if we carry out to its logical conclusion the principle in the second quotation, that the truth of anything depends on nothing less than the character of the whole; for plainly, if there is any degree whatever of irrationality anywhere in the universe, then since, as James argues, it is the character of the whole that determines the truth of every part, this irrationality must infect every part to some degree, and truth is never attainable; and the contradiction between this last result and the chief principle of Pragmatism is obvious.

"Rationality," continues James happily, "has at least four dimensions: intellectual, æsthetical,

¹ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 81.

² *Ibid.*, p. 90, (*re* Hegel).

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moral, and practical";¹ but here again it may be seen that, in all these aspects alike, there can appear but one and the same character whose presence confers rationality—that character being the nature of a true whole.² And this has diverse aspects, corresponding to James's "dimensions"—no intellectual scheme, for example, is thoroughly rational unless it be throughout self-consistent and free from contradiction; every æsthetic work must be pervaded by one harmonious unity, and every moral system by some controlling ideal, which again must take form as end and aim if we make our system a practical one.³

But it must now be noted further that James persists throughout in giving these terms—"rational" and "rationality"—a meaning much too restricted and narrow. "Intellectually," he continues, "the world of mechanical materialism is the most rational, for we subject its events to mathematical calculation"—thus expressing the widespread popular idea, which a thinker of his calibre should really have transcended, that true rationality always finds its highest and fullest expression only in the processes of mathematical

¹ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 112.

² But not a totality. See note *ante* (p. 37).

³ This brings to light, in another aspect, the fundamental defect of the pragmatic contention that truth is determined by practice; for practice always implies end, aim, purpose, and these again cannot be confined within any limits short of the real whole, which they may of course reach through the social, economic or moral world.

⁴ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 112.

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calculation; which, however really owe their certitude to their purposeful abstractness, and which, as this abstractness increases, come at last to verge on the irrational, as when they deal with imaginary mathematical quantities and dimensions.

But this very generally held belief that the rationality of an argument or of a system depends upon the degree to which it is capable of taking on itself a mathematical character, and so becoming amenable to mathematical calculation, is a mere mischievous delusion, as is the allied view that mathematical results and truths have, essentially as such, a special kind and degree of certainty superior to that of all other truths; for on the contrary, the truths which are derived from careful sense-perception, as also those truths which depend on moral conviction, are equally certain with mathematical truths, although they are of course never matters of mathematical calculation; and it is needless to add that they are equally rational—indeed, if we are to adhere to pragmatic principles, and regard “truth as a matter of working and successful applicability to practical life,” we must ascribe to them a superior rationality, because mathematics has obviously, when compared with these, a much more limited scope.

As James devotes a long chapter in his *Principles of Psychology*¹ to this subject, a few words on the real nature of mathematical certainty may not be

¹ Chap. xxviii., *Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience*. His standpoint is pragmatic and experimental.

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out of place. To state the matter as concisely as possible, the certitude which seems to pertain peculiarly to mathematical truths arises simply from the clearness and definiteness which we are able to give, by means of an artificial intellectual abstraction, to all our mathematical concepts and processes—to lines, points, angles, quantity, number, position, addition, and all the other elements of pure mathematical content. We are thus able, by purposely excluding all (or nearly all) extraneous and irrelevant matter, finally to determine *exactly* the content with which we are dealing, and at the same time also all the relevant conditions under which it is to be dealt with; each element, that is, which is taken (line, number, etc.), and equally every process that it goes through (addition, deflection, etc.), is thus exactly and exhaustively determined. The definition of every term in any particular problem is exact and invariable; and it should now be plain therefore, that the resultant truth of every purely mathematical operation, be that simple or complex, must also be exact and invariable, since the precisely determined conditions which have governed every detail of these operations throughout must¹ also, just as precisely, determine the final result.

¹ With "must" of course necessity is introduced afresh, in this case into a truth which is non-mathematical, but is itself a basis of mathematics; we have here, *i.e.*, a necessary truth which is not mathematical but logical; and mathematics in its nature (though not in its content) is then a subdivision of logic.

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All truth alike, then, as truth—as freed, *i.e.*, from all irrelevant matter which has no real bearing on the issue—is necessary truth, is necessarily true; and were we thus able in every case to determine the *exact* scope and meaning of all our terms and ideas, all our truths would have the same clear certainty as mathematics. But in ordinary “matters of fact,” as we call them, or of science or history, it is obvious that we can never possibly obtain any but incomplete—*i.e.*, inexact—knowledge of the special content concerned; and just so far, therefore, as that is the case does our truth remain contingent, doubtful, open to question, or even to reversal when better and wider knowledge is attained; but in moral conviction again these uncertain and doubtful results are avoided, because that conviction gives us what we regard as amounting to exact and exhaustive knowledge, certainly not of all the conditions, but of all the *relevant* conditions, which bear upon that particular case. We may, for example, be morally convinced of a man’s honesty, because we know his inner character so thoroughly that no amount of mere evidence of facts can convince us that he has committed a dishonest act. Of the circumstances of the alleged offence we may perhaps know nothing; but those facts, for us, are quite irrelevant. They do not in this case determine our conviction, which depends on what is, for us in this particular instance, solely relevant—that is, our knowledge of the person’s moral character; and if, again, because of the facts,

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we should come to alter our opinion, this merely means that facts hitherto regarded as being irrelevant have now become relevant.

And connected with this misuse of the term "rationality" is James's treatment of the "fixed nature of truth." "For any knowledge of ours to be quite true, it must be knowledge by universal concepts. . . . This is the tradition known as Rationalism in philosophy."¹ But these views certainly can neither be ascribed to the Hegelian system itself, nor to more recent systems which are allied to it; rather, these systems are the antitheses of Rationalism,² and expressly repudiate the doctrine that truth is ever fixed, or that our knowledge can ever under any circumstances be quite true. Nothing can be clearer on this point than the statement: "Even the truest truth . . . is not quite true"³—from which it follows at once that no knowledge can ever be quite true, and, indeed, the expansive nature of the concept, as Hegel exhibited it, is admirably described by James himself in his chapter on Hegel's Dialectic. Here again we find James criticising opinions which only secondary writers have ever put forward, and which the deeper thinkers on these subjects have always most emphatically disclaimed.

¹ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 237

² See *Logic* (Bosanquet), vol. ii., p. 270, note b.

³ *Loc. cit.*, p. 291; cf. also, "No possible truth is quite true." Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 544.

VI.—JAMES AND BERGSON

PHILOSOPHIC salvation, then, is to be discovered neither in Monism nor in Rationalism; and James found no relief from his difficulties until, as he himself tells us,¹ he became acquainted with the work of Bergson—the remainder of *A Pluralistic Universe* being almost entirely devoted to the advocacy of Bergsonian principles.

With the last notes of the Pragmatist discord there mingled the opening bars of the Bergsonian symphony, which was hailed in many quarters as the final revolution in philosophy, and against which reaction has only recently set in. And as it is frequently said that Bergson's own exposition of his principles is pre-eminently clear, it is very refreshing to find James endorsing the opinion of a recent French writer, that fully to understand Bergson demands "a certain inner catastrophe." One must, we find, become "flexible enough for the execution of a psychological change of front"²—a feat which would however appear, since our psychological constitution is the result of some millions of years of evolution, rather a difficult preliminary to the comprehension of any philoso-

¹ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 214.

² *Loc. cit.*, p. 266.

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phical system. Nor, supposing this necessary transformation to have been achieved, do we find that Bergson (as James presents him) brings forward any novel principles to bear upon the ultimate Pluralism or Monism of the world. It is certainly no new discovery of Bergson's that "Reality always is a conflux of the same with the different";¹ for that is a fundamental, even a commonplace, of Hegelian logic; and again, to insist that "the universe is continuous"² is surely to surrender any consistent and ultimate Pluralism.

It is impossible to avoid introducing some slight technicality here, which need, however, present no difficulty; it has long been one fundamental principle of philosophical logic that every real thing³ is at the same time both individual, and an identity-in-difference, which apparently barbarous and contradictory term means nothing more than that every content which we take to be real has various aspects—different attributes, constituent elements—which in the first place obviously differ from each other; but which also (and this is the vitally important point), in spite of this ultimate difference, cohere together, so as to constitute a thing,⁴ in virtue of some underlying identity of character

¹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 257; cf. also p. 260: "Throughout the whole finite universe each real thing proves to be many different without undergoing the necessity of breaking into disconnected editions of itself."

² *Loc. cit.*, p. 258; on "Continuity," see "Rationality," *ante*.

³ "Thing" here does not mean merely "material object," but any more or less definite content in general.

⁴ See last note.

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which runs through them all, and overrides their mutual differences. Take, for example, the sugar which James instances as white and sweet,¹ to which we may add the properties hard, cheap, pleasant, etc. The problem is, how can "sugar" be all these ultimate different things at once?—possess at one and the same time these various irreconcilable properties, each of which, taken by itself, excludes the others, of sweetness, hardness, etc.? Or to state the question as it really ought to be put—How can these different properties be "sugar"? How is it that the mind comes to group them together and unify them under the name "sugar"? Now, it is no proper answer to this very difficult question to say, with the old associationist school,² that the mind acts in this way because these different properties are always found in coexistence; because, in the first place, if we apply this test strictly and admit no exceptional cases whatever, it is plain that they do not so invariably coexist. "Sugar" may be brown or white, but throughout it remains "sugar"; while on the other hand, day and night, although invariably associated, yet remain always separate entities before the mind. Invariable association, that is, is never here a sufficient and universal explanation; and in its stead philosophical logic asserts an underlying identity—an identity-in-

¹ *Pluralistic Universe*, Lect. V.

² Whose best known members are Hume and the two Mills.

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difference—which pervades and unifies these at first sight discrepant attributes, and in virtue of which these constitute the individual real thing “sugar.” Similarly for every other thing which the mind apprehends; and thus to say that “Reality always is a conflux of the same with the different,” is merely to propound a somewhat new version of an old principle.

It is obviously merely an extension of this same principle to its widest limits to say “the universe is continuous”¹—“our ‘multiverse’ still makes a ‘universe,’ for every part is in some possible or mediated connection with every other part *however remote*.”² If this principle really be accepted, then we are at once committed to an ultimate Monism—the concession is the absolute surrender of all pluralism in any real sense of that word. A universe really continuous—a “multiverse” in which all the parts without any exception are really interconnected—can only be thus continuous in virtue of some unifying characteristic which pervades the whole, and which overrules all the divisions which our partial knowledge and practical convenience cause us to set up in the world. A really consistent Pluralism demands differences, divisions, discontinuities, which are ultimate and cannot at all be overcome; and if, in spite of the obstinate

¹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 258.

² *Ibid.*, p. 325 (*italics mine*). Cf. p. 155, Fechner’s “most important conclusion . . . is that the constitution of the world is identical throughout.”

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disjunctions in the world which still baffle all philosophy, we postulate, as James does here, continuity and universal interconnection, then we are in reality, whatever we are in name, monistic.

It will undoubtedly appear strange that James should so readily make these important and large admissions, and yet adhere to his advocacy of Pluralism; and the only explanation of what appears at first sight either shallowness or obstinacy would seem to be a complete misconception, which James shares with Bergson, of the true nature of thought. "Thought," he asserts, "deals solely with surfaces,"¹ and we must therefore "dive back into the flux itself—turn towards sensation";² for "concepts are not parts of reality."³ "Instead of being interpreters of reality, concepts negate the inwardness of reality altogether."⁴ Now, if this were indeed true, our only possible course would be to abandon thought altogether, except as a matter of practice and expediency, and to turn elsewhere, as Bergson and James bid us, in search of reality. James throughout takes the view that thought only operates by giving us always fixed, definite, and "discontinuous" concepts, which then cannot be real; for reality in itself is not thus fixed, but is a continuous flux, which "discontinuous" concepts can of course only distort and misrepresent. And superficially this view, which James so ably ex-

¹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 250.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

² *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

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pounds, appears to be unquestionable; but none the less it is totally wrong. The ideas which thought gives us are only thus fixed, definite, discontinuous, so far as we choose to make them so; the truth is that this definiteness—the fixed limits within which at first sight they seem to be helplessly confined—are due to the various purposes which we have in view when we use these ideas. Their definiteness and limitation, however, is never thus essential and characteristic, but is really a mutilation which the practical use of ideas makes necessary. Consider, for example, the concept “man.” At first sight this idea appears to be quite definite; we seem to know what we mean by it, even if we cannot say all we mean. But when we come to express its significance, we find that we cannot do so at all unless we first of all determine our particular standpoint. To a doctor “man” means one thing, to a lawyer another, to an employer another, and to an ethnologist, again, something different from all these. The idea or concept “man” in itself, that is, is not at all definite and fixed; but nevertheless it can, and indeed must, be treated as definite, first in one sense and then in another, depending in each case wholly on what purpose we have in view in using the idea. Out of the very wide total significance of the concept itself—a significance which in the end we find we can never exhaust if we regard “man” in every possible aspect and connection—we can always select some special part, relevant to some special purpose and

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standpoint, and attend to that alone. But it is manifestly wrong to regard these partial and limited meanings as being the full general concept in itself. In being thus selected, these meanings are made more or less definite, and we can indeed carry this limiting process so far that in the end we may narrow the meaning down merely to some particular person—"this man here"—and such a narrow significance is then of course "discontinuous." But we cannot argue that therefore the idea "man" in its full meaning, and, further, all our concepts in general, are themselves likewise discontinuous; on the contrary, we can assign to none of our concepts¹ absolutely fixed and definite boundaries—we can make none of our ideas quite "discontinuous" from all others.

And when we seek the reason for this essential underlying continuity and indefiniteness of ideas, we find that it is due to their being the true interpreters and representatives of reality itself, instead of "negating" (as James asserts) "the inwardness of reality altogether"; for it is hopeless to turn away from thought in our quest for reality, and to search for this in sensation or "intuition." This principle was long ago expressed by Kant in his well-known *Sensation without Understanding is*

¹ Not even, as is often supposed, to mathematical concepts; for each of these expands on examination into some system which underlies it: point, triangle, line, for example, definite though they are, all imply the space system; each "fixed" number implies the system of quantity, and so on.

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Blind; and blindness is an inherent defect of sensation, and of its modern variant "intuition," to which current anti-intellectualism is itself blind, but which it could not remove in any case. To "turn towards sensation," to "dive into the flux," if this means to give up thought, is to deprive ourselves in advance of the only means by which we can ever perceive reality as such; for, even if we admit in the first place that reality is given in sensation, still—it is a commonplace of epistemology—we cannot perceive this reality until and unless sensation is taken up into thought—until it is dealt with by what Kant called the "understanding." And this "taking up" consists in the formation of concepts, of ideas, which reconstruct—reproduce—the reality which (we here assume) is given in sensation; and this essential connection and affinity between concepts and reality—this origin of our ideas in and from reality itself—gives us the true explanation of that indefiniteness and continuity which all ideas as such possess, but which they lose (to some extent) when, for any particular purpose, we regard them as definite. Concepts are "continuous," are connected endlessly with all other concepts,¹ because they arise in, and reconstruct, ultimate reality, which itself is endlessly continuous and is an infinite flux. But the fundamentally false view which James took of

¹ This is plainly implied in the passage—"every part (of the universe) is in some connection with every other part, however remote." *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 325.

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thought and its concepts—that these were essentially “discontinuous”—forced him to regard thought as the false interpreter of reality, and then to seek for reality elsewhere—in sensation.¹ Such a quest, however, is from the outset hopeless; the only method by which reality, to be known as such, can be brought before the mind is through the operation of thought upon the content presented to it, so that this finally comes to be included within one or other of the interconnected categories which make up the system of our knowledge, and constitute the real world as we know it. It is true that thought can never give us the whole of reality, for that is infinite and inexhaustible; but none the less all of reality which we can know is apprehended only through the operation of thought.

¹ This applies also in great degree to Bergson, who points us to “intuition.”

VII.—RADICAL EMPIRICISM

FROM Pluralism and Pragmatism the transition is now an easy one to "Radical Empiricism," the title chosen by James himself—a system of thought which he "came toward the end of his life to regard as more fundamental and more important than Pragmatism"¹ itself. But in this respect it would appear that James had altered his opinion to some degree as time passed, for although he says in the preface to *Pragmatism*, "There is no logical connection between Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism," we must contrast with this statement the passage, "The establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making Radical Empiricism prevail";² and it is in the light of this later expression of his views that James's treatment of the subject should be considered.

There remains, then, the question, What is "Radical Empiricism"?—a question not very easy to answer. For the subject is one which is more closely concerned with the special technicalities of philosophy than is either Pluralism or Prag-

¹ *Radical Empiricism*, p. iv.

² *Meaning of Truth*, p. xii.

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matism, which have always in themselves appealed directly to the general mind; and consequently its treatment here must be comparatively brief. The volume which bears the title contains twelve philosophical papers, reprinted from different periodicals, which deal with consciousness, experience, and relations, from the "radical empiricist" standpoint; and this standpoint itself is best defined in James's own words:

"I say 'Empiricism,' because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'Radical,' because it treats the doctrine of Monism itself as a hypothesis, . . . does not dogmatically affirm Monism as something with which all experience has got to square";¹ and this is certainly the least technical account of the system which it is possible to give, and brings out conspicuously the tentativeness and open-mindedness which characterise it. We have, again, its more technical significance in the words, "The directly apprehended universe needs no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure;"² and, "It is the author's most rigorous statement of his theory," writes the editor of *Radical Empiricism*, "that reality is an experience-continuum."³

¹ *The Will to Believe*, pp. vii-viii.

² *Meaning of Truth*, pp. xii-xiii.

³ *Radical Empiricism*, p. xiii.

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These, then, are the fundamentals of *Radical Empiricism*; and it will perhaps be a sufficient criticism of the system here to draw attention to the contrast almost amounting to a direct contradiction, between these principles themselves and those which have hitherto been considered.

For throughout *A Pluralistic Universe* it has been James's principal contention that human thought is quite inadequate to the proper apprehension of the universe. On this point in itself one further quotation will be sufficient: "You cannot make continuous being out of discontinuities, and your concepts are discontinuous";¹ while at the same time, as we have just seen: "The directly apprehended universe possesses in its own right a . . . continuous structure." But if we now develop the implications of each of these positions, it becomes certainly difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile them with each other. For it is an accepted principle of philosophy that our "direct apprehension" of the universe is only possible through the work of thought—a principle which is best known in its Kantian form: "Sense without understanding is blind."²

The "directly apprehended universe," then, is so apprehended only by means of thought and thought's concepts; and this universe, James now maintains, is continuous; but concepts themselves again are

¹ *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 236.

² Cf. also Mr. Bradley—"The union in all perception of thought with sense—this is the one foundation of truth." *Appearance and Reality*, p. 379.

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essentially discontinuous, and from them we can never obtain continuous being—can never, that is, by means of concepts, attain to the apprehension of a continuous universe. The essential contradiction here now becomes plain: our knowledge of the “continuous universe” is the result of thought. This is the Kantian principle; but James has always strenuously maintained that thought—the intellectualistic activity which is the sheet-anchor of “Rationalism”—is quite incapable of giving us an adequate grasp of continuity, because its concepts are themselves discontinuous; and continuity—this is the fundamental principle of *Radical Empiricism*—is the basal characteristic of the universe. Hence arises the dilemma: the “generalised conclusion” which James came to regard as more and more valuable—the conclusion that the universe possesses a continuous structure—is a conclusion which James’s own account of human thought, as yielding only and essentially discontinuities, declares to be quite impossible of attainment.

Equally curious, too, is the principle that reality is an “experience continuum,”¹ for here again we find James in entire accord with his inveterate opponent, Mr. Bradley—just as we have seen that Mr. Bradley long ago gave expression to the essential contentions of *Pragmatism*;² for that *Reality* “essentially is experience” is the fundamental and final principle of Mr. Bradley’s great work *Appear-*

¹ *Radical Empiricism*, p. xiii.

² *Ante*, p. 17.

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ance and Reality.¹ It is true, of course, that the experience which Mr. Bradley thus identifies with reality is neither human experience itself, nor any type of experience which we can at all imagine or conceive. It is rather a transcendent experience which includes within itself all other modes of experience whatsoever; while James, on the other hand, would appear to hold that the "experience-continuum" which for him constitutes reality is, or is based upon and analogous to, our human experience itself. But it would appear to be plain that if we are to identify reality with experience in any sense whatever (and this principle is of course in itself open to question, if we choose), then it is not at all easy to admit that it must be of the type of human experience in any ultimate sense. For human experience is plainly complex, including within itself many diverse and even opposed phases; so that we must ask, With which of these phases or types is reality identical? Is the universe, as Schopenhauer held, a revelation of Will and Idea? or must we regard it, with von Hartmann, as somehow an "unconscious" experience? [It cannot be, on James's own principles, a universe of bare thought—that is the vicious heresy of "Rationalism"; neither can it be wholly emotional, for human emotions have purely physiological conditions.²] Where, then, in our experience, can we find

¹ "There is but one Reality, and its being consists in experience." *Appearance and Reality*, p. 455.

² See *Principles of Psychology*, Chap. XXV.

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the basis or the content of reality? Can we indeed expect our mere human experience, perhaps only a passing phase in the eternal developmental processes of the universe—can we hold this to be ultimate reality? If, then, we choose to identify reality with experience, must we not rather, with Mr. Bradley, take this to be an "Absolute," at once transcending, while it includes within itself, all other experiences and modes of being?

VIII.—RELIGION AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

IT remains to consider the attitude which James adopted towards religion; and his treatment of this sphere of human experience will doubtless prove to many the most interesting and valuable part of his work; for between religion and philosophy there has been an age-long connection which not even their extremest hostility has ever been able completely to destroy. To many persons, indeed, philosophy is valuable, or is worthless, only in so far as it supports, or denies, current religious truths. And the unconscious instinct which often prompts this attitude is, like many other instinctive impulses, well-founded; for it appears to arise from the feeling that there must be, in the end, some measure at least of substantial agreement between our reasoned conclusions and our religious beliefs; and whether we subordinate reason to faith or not, we feel that between them there should be harmony and not discord. It would therefore have been practically impossible for a thinker such as James altogether to have omitted to deal with the relations between religion and philosophy; nor could he have been surpassed in that true sympathy and wide

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knowledge which are together necessary for the proper accomplishment of such a task.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, then, we find a comprehensive and thorough consideration of the many questions inevitably raised, characterised by an intellectual grasp equally wide in its range and profound in its penetration. It is true that James chooses always the most striking instances of each type of religious experience, but this is of set purpose, for it is in these well-marked cases, he argues, that there are displayed the features most characteristic, and if, therefore, we succeed in dealing properly with them, it follows that the more normal phenomena will also find their due explanation.

His work, then, deals comprehensively with the physiological aspects of religious experiences, with mysticism, conversion, and santliness, in whatever religious system or individual instance these may occur; so that with such an abundance of material it is only possible here to give a brief account of the main final conclusions which James reaches, and which are succinctly set forth in his final chapter, taken together with the "Postscript."

*Since the age when Descartes and his immediate successors paid a suspicious intellectual homage to the dogmas of the medieval church which imprisoned Galileo and burnt Giordano Bruno, no leading philosophical thinker, if we except Berkeley—and he was a Bishop—had accorded unconditional

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acceptance to the religious truths of his own day. Hume and Spinoza were anathema; while the transformation which Kant and Hegel effected within, even while they endorsed, our modern fundamental religious principles, renders these almost unrecognisable by, and practically ineffective for, the ordinary man; so that till the most recent times, philosophy has either openly questioned, or has but faintly approved, the accepted fundamentals of religion. These fundamentals certainly appear to be coming once again into favour—it is sufficient to instance the work of Royce, Bergson, and Eucken; but nevertheless it is doubtful if any duly accredited writer has as yet given such unqualified allegiance and such frank recognition to religion as James gives in the work before us: That his attitude would be tolerant and sympathetic, whatever the character of his own final conclusions, might of course have been anticipated; but these final conclusions themselves are wholly favourable to the common basal principles of the great religions; and there is necessary only a brief résumé of these results in themselves, together with some slight consideration of the consequences for philosophy which would appear to follow from their acceptance.

As may be anticipated, the treatment which James accords to the subject as a whole is throughout consistently pragmatic—his results are arrived at “by spiritual judgments only, appreciations of the *significance for life* of religion.”¹ And certainly

¹ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 485 (italics mine).

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it is in the sphere of religion, if anywhere, that Pragmatism comes into its own; for here at least we can never exclude for a moment the practical results of our principles; here it is eternally true that "By their fruits ye shall know them."* From this standpoint then, and with this method, the ultimate principles which James advocates are these:

(1) "The visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it *draws its chief significance*."

(2) "Union with that higher universe is our true end."

(3) "Spiritual energy flows in and produces effects within the phenomenal world."¹

And the value for religion, or perhaps it would be better to say the religious value, of these principles is apparent at a glance. Taken together, they constitute the elements of every religion which has risen above fetichism; but on the other hand, of course, it is equally true that simply because they are elements, their distinctively religious value is after all not very great.

*And this raises the interesting question as to the nature of the contribution to religion which it lies within the power of philosophy to yield. The rivalry between religion and philosophy is, of course, older than that between religion and science; and it is a common belief that religious principles, until they have received the imprimatur of philosophy, possess but little validity; but this is really quite

¹ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 485.

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a wrong view. Religion has outlived many a philosophy, and it is dependent on none, because it includes its own philosophy within itself; but none the less it is gratifying to find a thinker possessing James's wide range of knowledge and power of original thought voicing these principles as the result of his close study of the phenomena of religious experience, and this, too, in its most characteristic and extreme forms—it is, at the least, a welcome departure from the too familiar filiations of devotion and ignorance, and of learning and agnosticism. ✕

At the same time it becomes very difficult to see how the results we have just cited are to be harmonised with James's Pluralism³¹; for it certainly seems to be the case that if we hold these views we are ultimately committed to some type of Monism, in the sense that the "spiritual universe" is (at bottom) pervaded by a true unity underlying and yet transcending its phenomenal diversity. For how otherwise can it be maintained that "the visible universe is part of a more spiritual," and that "Union with that higher universe is our true end"? Surely neither of these principles holds in a pluralistic universe; only on the prior assumption of an essential underlying unity is our ultimate union with the spiritual possible.

And here it is important to notice further the very great difference, which indeed almost amounts to a contradiction, between the spheres which James, in spite of his Pluralism, here regards as

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together constituting one ultimate whole. "Visible world"—"Spiritual universe"—can we imagine a wider and more direct contrast?—one the realm of undeviating physical law, the other scarce to be brought under any law which we can express; the one calculable and controllable, the other wholly eluding our mind's grasp; the world of sense, and the world of the spirit—surely here, if anywhere, must we remain Pluralists.

On the contrary, however, we find that James not only asserts that these two worlds are essentially one, but that he goes farther and subordinates the visible world to the spiritual—for it is from the spiritual that the visible "draws its chief significance"! What a welcome contrast is this to the crass materialism which has so long been prominent, if not indeed dominant, in modern philosophy—to those views for which the only ultimate realities are matter (however refined) and physical law, and for which consciousness, with all its wealth of poetry and thought, is reduced to an epiphenomenon!¹

This materialistic tendency in modern philosophy of course had its origin in the influence of nineteenth-century science with all its vast developments. But it is no disparagement of science to assert that philosophy is not compelled to follow at its heels; rather is the converse true, and all our

¹ Such views of course are (as philosophy) plainly suicidal—they bring about their own destruction; for Materialism is itself the work of thought, and therefore itself a mere epiphenomenon!

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scientific concepts must themselves, in essence if not in detail, be brought to the judgment bar of philosophy—and James himself is here under no such delusion as has confused the thinking of many recent writers. “I believe,” he says, “the impersonality of the scientific attitude to be shallow.

. . . Religion remains infinitely less hollow and abstract than a science which prides itself on taking no account of anything private at all. . . . By being religious we establish ourselves in possession of ultimate reality.”¹ ✕

But if religion is thus a legitimate (if not indeed an imperative) activity of man's nature, it does not therefore follow that all must be religious in the same way—the wind bloweth where it listeth. James—in this typically American—is no advocate of a rigid uniformity. Every phase of religious experience, however fantastic or extreme it be, falls within his purview and contributes to the final result. “Is the existence,” he asks, “of so many religious types and sects and creeds regrettable? . . . No emphatically. . . . It takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.”²]

What, then, is the “meaning” which demands so many diverse and conflicting interpretations? Is there any one characteristic which is essential and common to all types of religion, unifying them in spite of their apparently irreconcilable differences? Yes, James asserts—“There is a certain uniform

¹ *Varieties*, pp. 498, 500.

² *Ibid.*, p. 487.

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deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts—an uneasiness, and its solution. There is something wrong about us as we naturally stand; and we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers.”¹

How familiar is this utterance to the religious themselves! And how foreign, how unhelpful, to those whom religion has never touched! For it is merely the world-old gospel from the lips of a modern philosopher. All the old features, as old as human nature itself, are here; “there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand”—what is this but the old dogma of “original sin,” and of the insufficiency of the “natural man”? And from this wrongness “we are saved”—here again is the unmistakable note which has sounded in every religion which has ever risen above a mere ethic; indeed, James’s position appears to be wholly one with the familiar “Sin and Salvation” of evangelicalism. It is, to say the least, worlds removed from the religiosity which recognises never “wrongness,” but merely imperfection; which finds no other fault with our natural state than its incompleteness; and which seeks not salvation but merely a fuller evolution and a better development. With such an attitude James’s views are in striking contrast; and if any criticism at all suggests itself, it need refer only to the last words of our quotation—“We are saved . . . by making proper connection

¹ *Varieties*, p. 508.

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with the higher powers." We venture to think that the Bunyans and the Wesleys—the saints and mystics of every religion—would invert this, and say that we are saved rather by the Highest making "proper connection" with us: between these two positions, when properly appreciated, there is, for religion at least, a universe of difference.

✓ "Union with that higher universe," then, "is our true end"; obviously, therefore, the method by which this union comes about is a supremely important matter. Can science and philosophy, approaching the problem in that dispassionate spirit which, from its very nature, is impossible for religion, find any clue to the character of the process? James believes this to be possible, if we turn to that comparatively modern field of psychological research—the realm of the subconscious. The self-conscious person, he points out—the self *par excellence*—is really but a very small part of the whole sphere of our personality; it is a—perhaps the—most important part, but none the less only a part; and below the level of our fully conscious personality there exists the dark and silent region of the subconscious. The ego or self, that is, may be compared to those tiny islets which dot the vast Pacific, each the abode of a luxuriant life, and each apparently completely isolated from its neighbours, which are, however, in reality only the highest peaks of a submerged continent; and in this sphere of the subconscious self modern psychology believes

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that we find the true explanation of much that is mysterious in human experience. To describe its characteristic features in any detail would be but to repeat what may be found in any good textbook on the subject; it is sufficient here to say that it is within this "subconscious continuation of our conscious life"¹ that James believes those influences arise and act which result in all the well-known subjective experiences of religion—"the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come,"² and through which he becomes united to the "higher part of the Universe" which James calls God.³

Now, whatever may be said of the value of this theory of the subconscious, and of its successful application to the innumerable difficulties involved, it has at least the merits of being clear and definite, and also of certainly explaining, in very great degree, the phenomena presented. There can be no doubt, that is, that the sphere of our highest and fullest consciousness is not in itself complete and isolated, but is rather continuous with, and is influenced and modified by, the lower region (if we choose to call it so) of the subconscious; and unless we accept this theory in principle, it seems quite impossible to obtain any satisfactory view of a large region of human experience, including within this much of what is properly called religious: for this can no longer be placed in a category entirely by

¹ *Varieties*, p. 512. ² *Ibid.*, p. 515. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

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itself, and so regarded as altogether outside and beyond explanations and theories which are applicable to other spheres of life. So much must be admitted without any reserve; but the fundamental question remains as to whether the theory of the subconscious will cover *all* the facts, and above all whether it will explain the most important and characteristic of these. For it must be remembered, after all, that man is man not in being acted upon, but in himself acting; not in being influenced, either from without or from below, but only in responding, consciously and decisively, to the influences which affect him. Man is, it is true, in the closest touch with the surrounding universe, from whose activities he cannot for a moment escape; and it is equally true that these activities affect him very largely in and through the subconscious self. But none the less is it the case that man is never merely the passive object of such influence; his essential character and activities are never the mere mechanical resultants of their operation, but are revealed rather in his independent and autonomous spiritual attitude in response to them; his nature is never merely passively moulded by, but always rather spontaneously shapes itself against, its environment; man does not merely float on the current of the universe, but himself directs his own path through it—and this is true above all in the realm of moral conduct and religious experience. There we must always maintain the fundamental principle of the primacy of the will; and to do this is, essentially,

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not primarily a metaphysician.¹ This is, of course, in no sense a reproach; for metaphysicians are like poets, born and not made; and wise Nature, with her sure knowledge of her children's needs, sends us a hundred poets for one metaphysician; so that a chorus of singers attends each great thinker,² hymning the Divine Wisdom, as it were, until this can give itself utterance in another Word, spoken by lips which have been touched by a live coal, seraphim borne from the altar.³

But though to rank with "the kings of thought"⁴ may perhaps not be accorded to James, still the unique merits of his work are beyond dispute. Few writers have wielded with so light and easy a touch his wide command of facts; fewer still can so delicately sense the spiritual and intellectual needs of their own generation. Philosophy demands interpreters equally with original thinkers; and to interpret, to stimulate discussion, to arouse universal interest in philosophic problems, may perhaps most justly be said to have been James's *forte*; a faculty of very rare order which obviously necessitates its own special type of originality and insight. "Scratch a conviction" (thus we may adapt the proverb) "and you find a philosophy"; but to mould the thought of the average man into the types of historic Philo-

¹ *Studies in Truth and Reality*, p. 158.

² We may recall the profound thought that runs through the work of Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning.

³ *The Book of Isaiah*, vi. 6.

⁴ "The Kings of Thought
Who waged contention with their time's decay."
SHELLEY: *Adonais*.

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sophy is a labour of Hercules; and this, wholly without any show of strain or effort, is what James has succeeded in doing.

Perhaps this accounts for what, if we consider his work as a whole, must be considered its most serious defect—its lack of consistency. His sympathies were so wide, his interests and affinities so varied, that each successive development of contemporary thought appears in its turn to have impressed him so deeply that he proceeded at once to incorporate and expound it with too little regard to its agreement with the rest of his system; first Pragmatism, then Bergson, and finally his own Empiricism; and thus his work remains a fine mosaic rather than a truly artistic whole. It is the fashion to regard inconsistency as the attribute of a powerful mind; but whether this is true or not depends on what we mean by the term. For there are two radically different types of inconsistency—the inconsistency of development, and that of sheer contradiction—the one demanding true harmony, the other destroying it. The successive stages of every course of development, however diverse they appear, are still self-consistent and harmonious, whether it be from germ to man, or from tribe to empire. But the different phases of James's system are by no means thus self-correcting and complementary; for as I have tried to show, it appears impossible to reconcile his Pragmatic theory of the nature of Truth with his account of "common sense," or his position in *A Pluralistic Universe* with that of *Radical Empiricism*; while his Pluralism,

The Philosophy of William James

again, is very difficult to harmonise both with his concessions to Idealism and his central standpoint in the Philosophy of Religion.

But be that as it may, James has effectually destroyed the pestilent tradition that Philosophy is a specialised culture wholly aloof from the interests and concerns of everyday life. Before his day the rarity of Philosophers appears to have obscured the simple fact that every man is a philosopher; but Socrates, the father of our Western Thought, knew better than that, and "taught in the market-place; Plato and Aristotle moved out into the country";¹ while their medieval successors again took the further perfectly natural step of shutting themselves up in the study; but James, once for all, has unlocked the study door and thrown away the key.

¹ Zimmern, *The Greek Commonwealth*, p. 58. No student of Greek Philosophy should overlook this most interesting and able work.

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